



Scaling Literacy Success Through Reading Science

The timing is right to apply these ideas in every classroom, says Charlotte-Mecklenburg's academic officer

BY BRIAN G. KINGSLEY

Twenty years ago, the National Reading Panel reviewed more than 100,000 studies and made evidence-based recommendations on how we teach reading — yet those practices continue to be missing from most classrooms. Today, the alarms are still sounding about the quality of reading instruction in K-12 education.

School system leaders must understand the key themes and implications of this growing national conversation about literacy. There are real issues with the way that reading is taught in many classrooms, as well as new opportunities that school districts should explore.

As the chief academic officer in North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, where we have introduced reading reforms systemwide, I



Students at Allenbrook Elementary School in Charlotte, N.C., read in a colorful school hallway.

see the potential to improve reading instruction at scale and the tangible steps districts can take to do so. Vastly improved reading outcomes are actually within reach, and that should motivate all of us.

What's Gone Wrong

At the heart of this issue is poor understanding of the science of reading. Most educators are unaware of the research on how kids learn to read, partly because it is not a component of typical teacher preparation programs. There is no finishing school or certification process for coaches and administrators, so district leaders often are unaware of the research, as well. I have seen consistent misunderstandings about reading in three school districts where I have served as an administrator. I also needed to address my own “unfinished” learning.

It helps to get tangible about the instructional issues that flourish because of those misunderstandings. For example, the most common approach to reading instruction in U.S. classrooms — grouping students by reading level — isn’t actually supported by research. This approach poorly supports below-benchmark readers in catching up with their peers. Yet it remains conventional wisdom that leveled reading groups

serve children, and they are promoted by the most popular reading programs in the country, such as Fountas & Pinnell and the Teachers College Readers Workshop program.

In addition, teachers often spend too much instructional time on skills and strategies instruction, such as a teacher guiding students in how to “find the main idea.” It’s a practice with diminishing returns for student learning. Some mistakenly believe this approach will help students be more successful on assessments, but in fact, that’s not the case.

Bringing Evidence Into Practice

Our reading programs instead should be designed around these evidence-based practices.

- ▶ We must *build history and science content knowledge* for students because research shows that students’ background knowledge is essential to their reading comprehension. The newer English language arts curricula are designed around these topics, in order to help students learn about the world as they learn to read.
- ▶ In early grades, students must receive daily, systematic phonics instruction to ensure all students can decode words effectively.

► All students should *work with grade-level texts* during Tier 1 instruction. Teachers should use proven strategies for helping below-benchmark readers catch up to peers. Strategies that work include allowing students to first hear the text as a read-aloud before they read it (perhaps from a parent or aide, or from a classmate in paired reading); preteaching new vocabulary that is not defined within the text; and chunking texts into bite-sized reads (a few paragraphs, a page) when students read them for the first time.

If students experience these approaches in their Tier 1 ELA instruction in early grades, the strong majority will be successful as readers. At all levels, careful assessment should identify students requiring additional support, so that targeted intervention can happen. Yet districts that invest in these practices in Tier 1 instruction are seeing smaller numbers of students requiring Tier 2 and Tier 3 support.

Schools must get a great deal right as all of these practices are important. Early reading is described as rocket science for a reason. Many district and school leaders call for a national movement of professional learning around literacy so that our peers can experience a collective

awakening to the science of reading. Before educators can translate research into practice, they must “know better” so they can “do better.”

Raising Reading Bars

Getting beyond these issues is about supporting the people in your system as they discover and implement new reading practices.

In my experience, the strongest approach is centered around curriculum — giving teachers materials that align to reading science provides crucial support. Further, curriculum serves as a cornerstone of professional learning; curriculum implementation is a natural, powerful opportunity for job-embedded learning on reading research. In addition, many of the newer curricula are designed to be “educative” and contain professional learning resources within the teacher materials, sometimes in the lesson plans. For these reasons, I have seen curriculum implementation offer the most effective job-embedded professional learning.

Amidst the curriculum landscape, school districts finally have multiple choices for strong English language arts programs aligned to both research and standards and built for the pedagogy we seek. Experts speak of a “curriculum renaissance”



A volunteer at River Oaks Academy in Charlotte, N.C., helps two students with their reading.

sance.” I have seen it firsthand, having led two curriculum adoptions in the last three years, and I am awed at how rapidly the options have improved, even in that short period.

It is becoming easier to identify the better ELA curricula. *EdReports.org*, the respected product review site, helps educators quickly identify the research-aligned options. I strongly suggest districts consider the materials with “all-green” reviews on that site. They tend to come from newer providers, have been co-developed in classrooms and support student-centered pedagogies.

These curricula support excellent teaching, but it’s not easy teaching, and success begins and ends with support for district teams, and not only



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teachers. Professional learning initiatives must include building leaders, whose evaluation norms will need to evolve. A significant investment, perhaps 2-3 percent of the district operating budget, must be made during the initial implementation year and again in the subsequent years to build capacity.

We shouldn’t forget about adult learning for district leadership as we undergo these transitions. Engaging our school board and district teams in quality review processes has helped to align our work in Charlotte-

Mecklenburg, with its 148,000 students. School walkthroughs with our leadership and reviews of student work samples from one building to another have revealed glaring equity issues that gave us common purpose in our literacy improvement work.

Additional Resources

The growing national conversation is making it easier for educators to embark on learning the science of reading instruction. The author suggests these resources:

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

- ▶ *TheCurriculumMatters.org* and *AchieveTheCore.org*, websites offer numerous professional learning resources.
- ▶ *EdReports.org* and *LouisianaBelieves.com* provide educator reviews of K–12 curricula versus standards and research-aligned practice.
- ▶ The Reading League (*thereadingleague.org*) hosts an annual conference dedicated to the science of reading. The researchED conference (*researched.org.uk*) also features literacy research.
- ▶ *Shanahan on Literacy* (*shanahanonliteracy.com*), published by expert Timothy Shanahan, has a widely-read blog on literacy research. *Eduvites.org* is a blog focused on curriculum, with an emphasis on literacy.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

The following K–8 curricula receive strong reviews from EdReports and Louisiana educators:

- ▶ ARC Core
- ▶ Core Knowledge
- ▶ EL Education
- ▶ ReadyGen
- ▶ Wit and Wisdom

Shifting Priorities

A meaningful investment in our people and their capacity is key to raising reading outcomes. Of course, it’s not inexpensive. Most districts find that they must reprioritize in order to give literacy its appropriate level of investment and focus.

In the last decade, ed-tech spending has come to consume a significant portion of district budgets. Often, budgets are upside down for ed tech versus curriculum and professional learning. Chief academic officers are having to sunset some ed-tech initiatives, and I believe this comes at a good time. We have the benefit of years of experience with ed-tech initiatives, and we can prune wisely.

In every way, it is the right time to prioritize literacy. The increased focus on and awareness of reading science, alongside curriculum that truly aligns to those practices, fosters improved return on our investments in new curriculum and professional learning.

Experts believe that 95 percent of kids are capable of success as readers if we bring the right practices into classrooms, especially in early elementary grades. We have a massive opportunity to close the gap between today’s lagging reading proficiency rates and this potential by bringing the science of reading into all classrooms. ■

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